PREMIERE ISSUE!

BEACH HIGH

#1

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C. BRADFORD GORBY

FOR MATURE READERS ONLY

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BEACH HIGH™

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BEACH QUEEN'S FUNERAL

THE STEADY RHYTHMIC sounds of the surf washed over Elaine Montoya, where she lay on the sand with Jesse Daniels. Elaine inhaled the salty ocean air, listened to the breeze passing through the little stand of palm trees a little way down the beach. The Florida coast was dotted with palms. A beach without them just wouldn't be Florida, Elaine had always thought.

Despite the neon glare from hotels and condo complexes up and down the beach, the stars shone brilliantly. The sky was startlingly clear, and the moon striped the ocean with a swath of magical light that Elaine imagined might be a bridge across which she and Jesse could walk to a fantastical land where they could always be together.

Which wasn't at all realistic. Particularly since Jesse was going out with Elaine's best friend, Michelle Landry. But that didn't matter tonight. Not here on the beach with Jesse in her arms. They were hurting Michelle, Elaine knew that. But when Jesse had asked her to meet him here, on the beach, she couldn't help herself.

She had to have him.

Jesse Daniels was the guy every girl at Beach High wanted to date, or love, or bed, depending on the girl. But they all wanted him one way or another. Elaine and Michelle had been best friends throughout high school, and they were seniors now. But when Jesse asked Michelle out at the beginning of senior year, Elaine had immediately become jealous.

She was prettier than Michelle, in all the ways that mattered. She had a better body, a better personality, a better

everything. As recently as sophomore year, Michelle had been fat and pimple-faced! It just wasn't fair that Jesse should want her.

Of course, he didn't.

"I've been waiting for this night for so long," Jesse whispered in her ear, as he caressed her face, her neck and shoulders. He ran his fingers across her belly lightly, and Elaine shivered.

"Cold?" Jesse asked.

"Mmm," she lied. "Warm me up, Jesse."

He put his lips to her throat, to her shoulders, lower . . .

Elaine couldn't believe it was finally happening. Jesse had been in her dreams, both sleeping and waking, for four years. Finally, he had admitted that he had always wanted her, that he didn't think she would agree to be with him. The fool! How could she say no?

A small voice in the back of her head kept asking if she was doing the right thing. They were hurting Michelle, it said. And she didn't really know if Jesse was telling the truth, or just making up some crap to seduce her and then blow her off. He had a reputation for that kind of thing, but Michelle had always insisted it wasn't true.

Elaine refused to listen to that little voice. Jesse was everything she had ever wanted. Already she had started to wonder if she should go to Florida Atlantic University in Boca the following year, to be with Jesse. But she wanted to wait a while before bringing it up to him. Guys got skittish about stuff like that.

Jesse nuzzled her neck and began to slip the strap of her bikini down her shoulder.

"Jesse, wait," she protested. "I think we should wait until you tell Michelle. About us, you know?"

Jesse looked up into her eyes. He was so gorgeous, like Antonio Banderas only much younger and better looking, if that was possible. Those big eyes were overflowing with emotion.

"Don't be that way, Lainey," he urged her. "I swear I'll tell Michelle tomorrow, first thing. But tonight, tonight's just for us, chica."

Staring into her eyes, Jesse boldly slid the bikini strap down her shoulder. She couldn't look away, or lift a finger to stop him. She wanted him to have her, to do whatever he wanted with her.

Jesse slid the other strap down. He lay beside her on the blanket they had spread out for this purpose. Elaine was on her back and Jesse on one elbow, caressing her, drinking her with his eyes. He rolled her toward him and started to undo the snaps at the back of her bikini top.

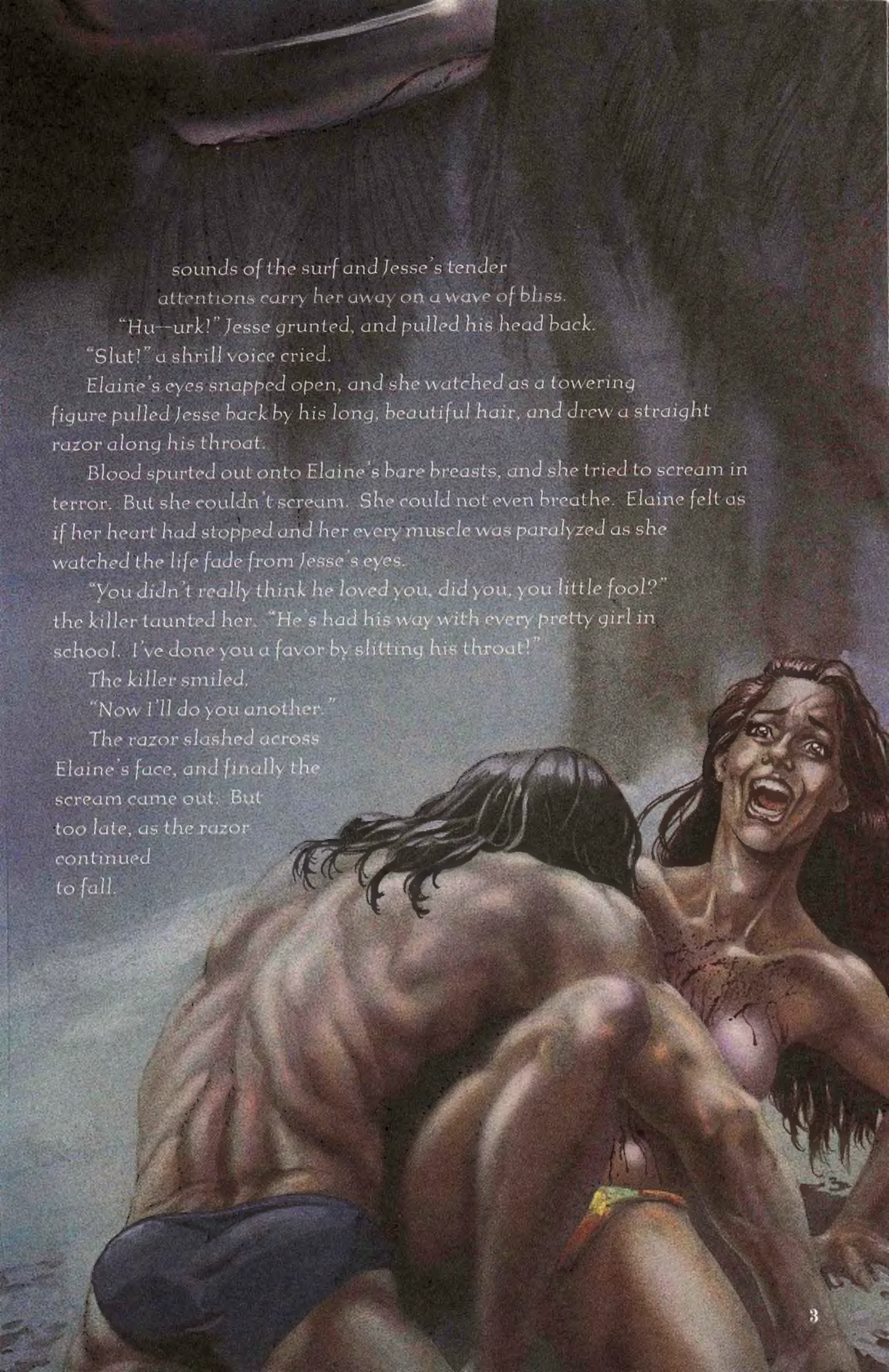
She stopped him with a hand.

"Wait," she said. Then she smiled. "Let me."

With a quick, deft movement behind her back, Elaine removed her bikini top and her breasts tumbled into the night air. Tenderly, Jesse began to kiss her there.

"Oh, Jesse," Elaine purred. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

She looked up at the stars one final time, then closed her eyes and let the



sounds of the surf and Jesse's tender attentions carry her away on a wave of bliss.

"Hu--urk!" Jesse grunted, and pulled his head back.

"Slut!" a shrill voice cried.

Elaine's eyes snapped open, and she watched as a towering figure pulled Jesse back by his long, beautiful hair, and drew a straight razor along his throat.

Blood spurted out onto Elaine's bare breasts, and she tried to scream in terror. But she couldn't scream. She could not even breathe. Elaine felt as if her heart had stopped and her every muscle was paralyzed as she watched the life fade from Jesse's eyes.

"You didn't really think he loved you, did you, you little fool?" the killer taunted her. "He's had his way with every pretty girl in school. I've done you a favor by slitting his throat!"

The killer smiled.

"Now I'll do you another."

The razor slashed across Elaine's face, and finally the scream came out. But too late, as the razor continued to fall.

"Quiet, everyone! Quiet, please!" Mr. Lovewell called in his raspy, theatrical voice. "Come on, now, we've only got one more week before the pageant, and we've got to get the opening number down precisely."

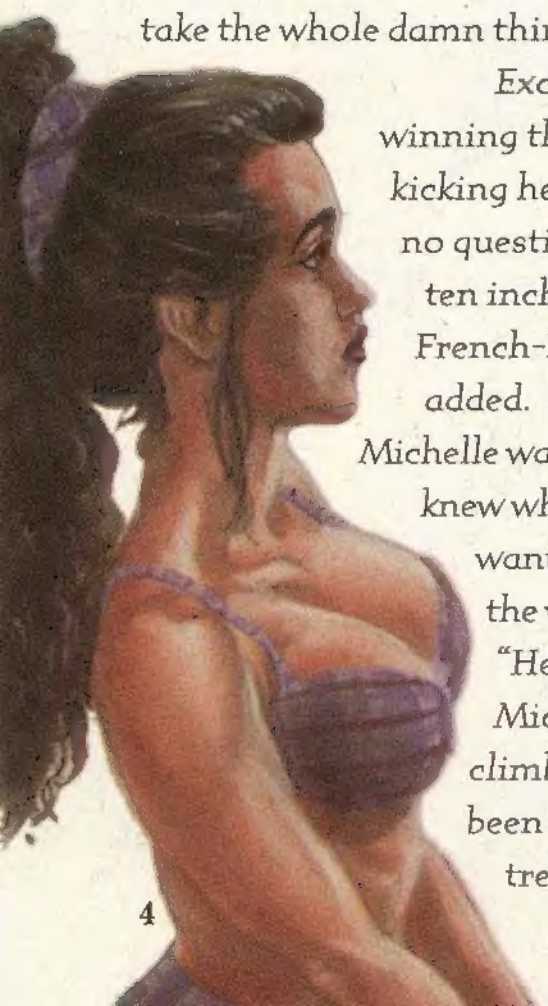
Michelle Landry sighed, stuck out a hip and tapped her foot in annoyance. She rolled her eyes for good measure. It wasn't like her, that kind of behavior. Not at all.

Most days, Michelle was happy as she could be. So happy, in fact, that it drove most of her friends, family and her boyfriend, Jesse, crazy. But why shouldn't she be happy? She had everything, right? Cool parents, good genes, smokin' SAT scores, and Jesse. What else did a girl need?

For starters, she didn't need to be in this stupid pageant, she thought. The Beach Queen Pageant was an annual event that began innocently enough about a million years ago. But since Michelle had started at Beach High, it had turned into some kind of MTV beach grind that should have been hosted by Daisy Fuentes or Jenny McCarthy. It was a step above the Girls of Hawaiian Tropic, but just a step.

And it was sponsored by the city, which killed her. Talk about sexist! But despite Michelle's protests, her best friend Elaine had insisted they enter the pageant. At first, it seemed like a joke, but then Elaine started to take it all way too seriously. Like she really wanted to win, for no more reason than because she suddenly had some kind of competition going with Michelle.

Well, Elaine could have the pageant. She could take Mr. Lovewell, the drama teacher the city had shanghaied into directing the pageant. She could take the whole damn thing. Michelle didn't want anything to do with it...



Except that she did. Elaine had become so obsessed with winning that Michelle wanted to really teach her a lesson by kicking her butt. Which wouldn't be too hard. Elaine was pretty, no question, but Michelle had an exotic edge over her. Five feet ten inches of olive skinned, green-eyed, hour glass figured French-Italian girl, and no preservatives or anything else added. She was all natural.

Michelle was smart, but that didn't mean she had to be a geek. She knew what she saw when she looked in the mirror. She didn't want that to be the only thing people cared about, but if that's the way Elaine wanted to play it, that was just fine with...

"Hey, Michelle!" Sabrina Coogan called.

Michelle spun around to see the shorter, red-headed girl climbing the steps to the pageant's platform, which had been built right on the beach among several stands of palm trees. Sabrina's red hair shone in the bright sun, and the

cool ocean breeze ruffled the floral-patterned sarong she wore knotted at the hip. It was green and pink, and the pink perfectly matched Sabrina's bikini top.

The girl could dress. Michelle wore a lavender and violet plaid patterned bikini, French cut on the bottom, Wonderbra miracle-working on top. She had tied her dark cascading hair back with a swatch of matching cloth. She knew she looked good, but Sabrina looked deadly. That was her all over. Michelle had no idea how the judges were going to pick the Beach Queen, but she figured anybody could win at this point.

The sun baked the sand and the pageant contestants as well. But it was still the middle of May, so it wasn't excruciatingly hot yet. It was a beautiful day, the best time of year in Florida. The ocean smelled strong and fresh, and the waves crashed weakly as the tide receded.

Michelle realized there were a lot worse places she could spend her Sunday morning.

Even though the pageant wasn't for another six days, guys and some girls, too, had gathered on the beach to watch them rehearse. It was part of the annual ritual. Most of the people on the beach went about their business, but there were always gawkers. Fortunately, it was just after eight o'clock in the morning. So far, there were only a few spectators. If the rest of the girls would get there, they could get things moving, shut Lovewell up, and get home before salivating freaks took over the beach. The pageant itself would be bad enough, but putting up with them every day for weeks was torture.

"Hey," Sabrina said as she approached, pushing past a knot of other girls on the platform.

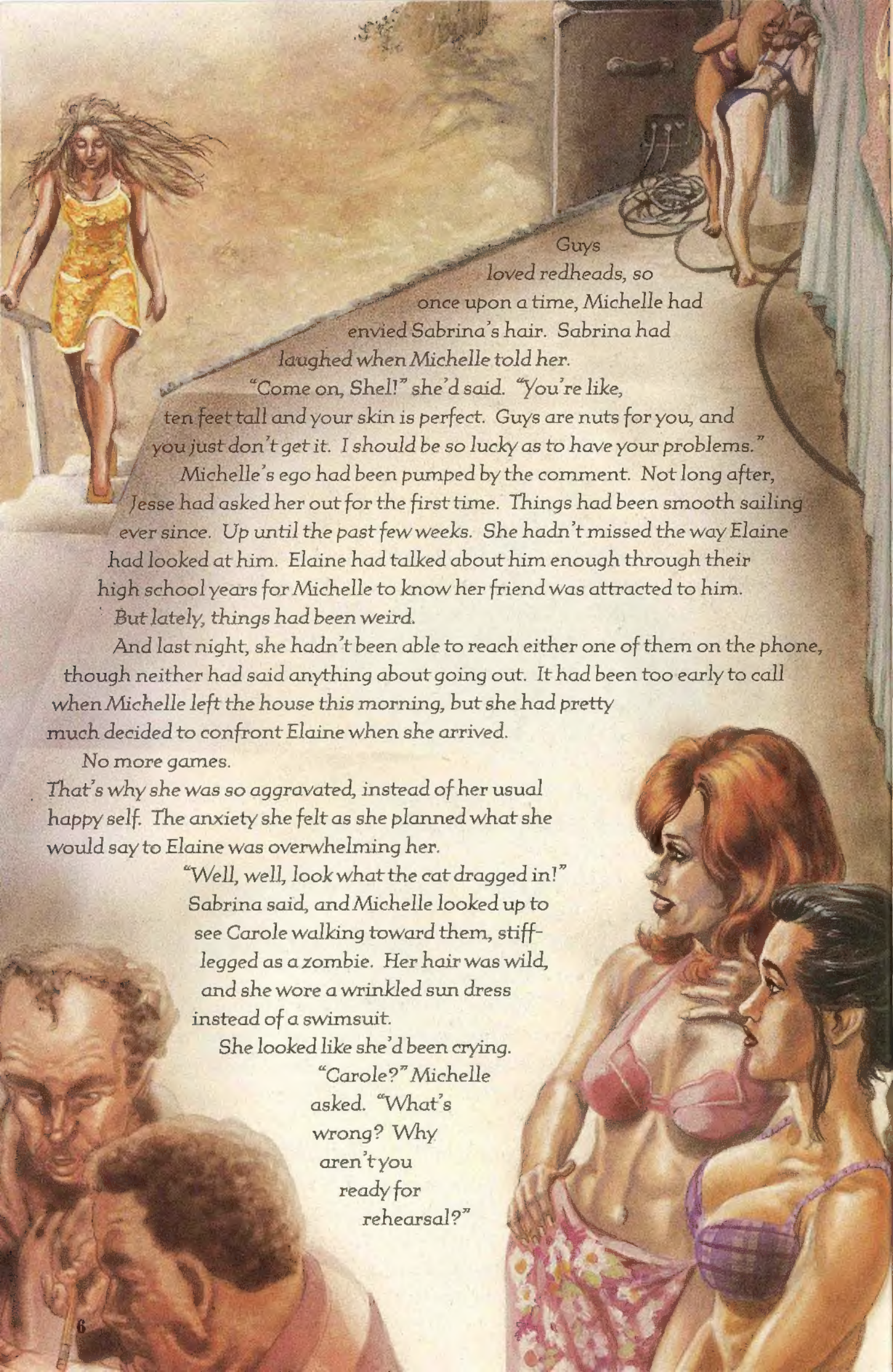
"Hey," Michelle replied. "Your boyfriend, Mr. Lovewell, is having a heart attack over everybody being late. I think he should enter the bikini competition himself, don't you?"

Sabrina smirked at the "boyfriend" comment. Nobody hated Lovewell the way she did, and Michelle knew it.

"Why is he surprised when we're late?" Sabrina asked. "Doesn't he know teen sex goddesses need their beauty sleep?"

They both laughed at that. Michelle had always liked Sabrina. She knew most of the girls in the pageant, but only a few of them were her friends. Along with Elaine Montoya and Carole Ligotti, Sabrina was one of those few. Carole was tall, blonde and lean. A tomboy who learned surfing at the age of nine, Carole still looked every inch a sexy beach bunny.

Sabrina was tough, and didn't try to hide it. She had a smart mouth, which sometimes got her into trouble, and sometimes got her out of it. Once, when her mother had called her "spunky," Sabrina had turned on the woman and said, "If you say that again, I'm going to have to kill you." Everyone laughed except Sabrina. She was kidding, but her anger was real.



Guys loved redheads, so once upon a time, Michelle had envied Sabrina's hair. Sabrina had laughed when Michelle told her.

"Come on, Shel!" she'd said. "You're like, ten feet tall and your skin is perfect. Guys are nuts for you, and you just don't get it. I should be so lucky as to have your problems."

Michelle's ego had been pumped by the comment. Not long after, Jesse had asked her out for the first time. Things had been smooth sailing ever since. Up until the past few weeks. She hadn't missed the way Elaine had looked at him. Elaine had talked about him enough through their high school years for Michelle to know her friend was attracted to him.

But lately, things had been weird.

And last night, she hadn't been able to reach either one of them on the phone, though neither had said anything about going out. It had been too early to call when Michelle left the house this morning, but she had pretty much decided to confront Elaine when she arrived.

No more games.

That's why she was so aggravated, instead of her usual happy self. The anxiety she felt as she planned what she would say to Elaine was overwhelming her.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in!" Sabrina said, and Michelle looked up to see Carole walking toward them, stiff-legged as a zombie. Her hair was wild, and she wore a wrinkled sun dress instead of a swimsuit.

She looked like she'd been crying.

"Carole?" Michelle asked. "What's wrong? Why aren't you ready for rehearsal?"

Carole met Michelle's gaze, and then began to sob. The two girls hugged, and Sabrina put a hand on Carole's shoulder.

"Hey," Sabrina said. "I was just busting on you. I didn't know you'd get so upset. What's going on?"

Carole pushed her mane of blonde hair away from her face and wiped her other hand across her eyes. She took a deep breath.

"It's Sarah," Carole said, her voice a pained whisper. "They found her."

"Found her?" Sabrina asked. "You mean she's . . . ?"

Carole nodded.

"Oh, my God," Michelle gasped. She and Sarah had never been friends, but she'd known the girl since the fifth grade. Sarah Shipman had been one of the pageant contestants as well, but she hadn't shown up at school on Friday, or at rehearsal on Saturday. That was two days missing, and now she'd turned up dead.

"What happened?" Michelle asked. "I thought she ran away."

"She was . . . she was murdered!" Carole cried. "The Coast Guard found her. Somebody . . . oh, God, somebody tied her ankles to a barbell and threw her overboard. Jesus, I can't believe she's dead. Why would anyone want to kill Sarah?"

All three girls were quiet for a few minutes. Over Carole's shoulder, Michelle saw Mr. Greenwald, her history teacher, whisper something to Mr. Lovewell while pointing at Carole. Mr. Lovewell put a hand over his mouth in a gesture of shock that would have been comical, if not for Sarah's murder.

"Can we take five minutes and walk?" Carole asked. "I think I just need to get away from these people for a few minutes. But I thought you guys would want to know. Nobody else will care. They'll just be glad there's less competition."

Michelle began to nod in agreement, but just then Sabrina twitched in an odd kind of way, as if what Carole had said annoyed her. It was an odd expression, but Michelle passed it off as just a facet of the different ways in which people deal with death. She herself had been stunned into near silence.

As they walked down off the platform, Michelle expected Lovewell to stop them, but he said nothing. She put a hand on Carole's shoulder, and they walked wordlessly toward a stand of palms right at high tide line.

"I could use some shade," Sabrina commented. "In fact, I could use a nice Mai-Tai or a Margarita right now."

"You drink too much," Michelle said flatly. The line was a conversation killer. They steered away from the subject of Sabrina's romance with alcohol.

"God, you know what I just thought of?" Carole said. "I wonder if anyone's told Elaine. Maybe that's why she's not here yet. If not, I sure don't want to tell her. She and Sarah have been close for years. They grew up, like, six houses away from each other."

Michelle scanned the palms ahead of them. It would be nice to have some

shade after all, she thought. And if there were a place where she could sit down without getting her butt too sandy, all the better.

Something pale caught her eye. She focused on it.

A hand. Somebody's hand was protruding from behind the thick base that the four palm trees shared.

"Looks like someone's snoozing on the sand," Sabrina pointed out. Apparently, she had seen it, too.

As they watched, a large scarlet shelled crab skittered over the sand sideways.

Michelle felt like she was going to puke.

"Whoever that is," she said nervously, "I don't think they're asleep."

The three girls moved closer, cautiously, to the trees. They reached a point at which they could see a bit more of the arm attached to the hand. A few more steps and they would be able to see exactly who was laying on the sand, and what kind of condition they were in.

"I can't look," Carole mumbled, and turned away.

Sabrina and Michelle continued on together.

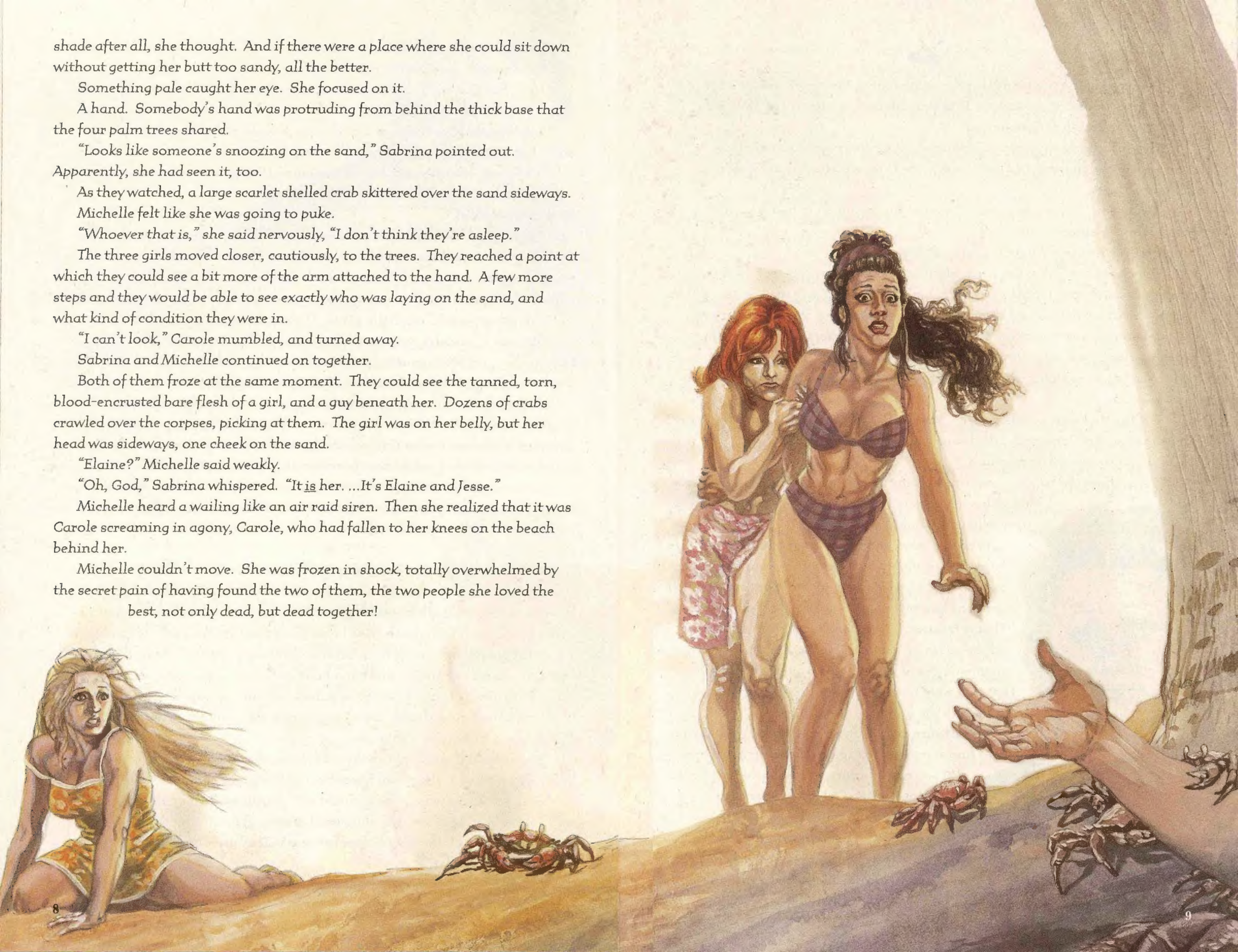
Both of them froze at the same moment. They could see the tanned, torn, blood-encrusted bare flesh of a girl, and a guy beneath her. Dozens of crabs crawled over the corpses, picking at them. The girl was on her belly, but her head was sideways, one cheek on the sand.

"Elaine?" Michelle said weakly.

"Oh, God," Sabrina whispered. "It is her. ...It's Elaine and Jesse."

Michelle heard a wailing like an air raid siren. Then she realized that it was Carole screaming in agony, Carole, who had fallen to her knees on the beach behind her.

Michelle couldn't move. She was frozen in shock, totally overwhelmed by the secret pain of having found the two of them, the two people she loved the best, not only dead, but dead together!



"Are you saying you think there's a connection, Michelle?" Miss Osborne, the school counselor, asked that Thursday afternoon, after all of Michelle's murdered friends had been buried.

Miss Osborne was supposed to interview, evaluate and counsel all of the girls in the pageant, but particularly the three who had found Jesse and Elaine's bodies.

"Don't you?" Michelle asked. "I mean, two dead girls in two days, and they're both pageant contestants.
It makes me nervous, Miss O. Can you blame me?"

"I suppose not," Miss Osborne admitted. "But Jesse was certainly not a pageant contestant I think you're reaching, Michelle. There may or may not be some kind of whacko serial killer or something out there, but I doubt one of your classmates or one of the girls from the other schools is murdering her competition. That's a little paranoid, don't you think?"

"Maybe you're right," Michelle offered. "But I'm going to be extra careful, just the same."

"I think that's an excellent idea," Miss Osborne said. "But not for the same reasons you do. Somebody killed your friends. Until the police find that person, we should all be on guard."

"I still think the killer is targeting pageant contestants," Michelle said, and Miss Osborne raised an eyebrow, perhaps a bit annoyed that Michelle would not give up.

"Michelle," she began, "you have a lot of reasons to be extremely upset, even paranoid over this. Your mother's death was less than two years ago, and her accident has never been appropriately explained. That is frustrating enough, but then you're left alone again by Jesse and Elaine, and the circumstances of their deaths would seem to indicate that they were involved with one another. Which only adds to the hurt.

"I'm not sure, but I wonder if you aren't just trying to find some way to explain these terrible losses. If you can be angry, maybe you won't feel so alone," Miss Osborne suggested.

Michelle smiled.

"Enough with the pop psychology, Miss O.," Michelle said, and forced a smile she didn't feel.

Miss Osborne smiled in return, but the expression made her scarred left cheek seem somehow sad. Even though Michelle was the "patient" there that day, though she had endured the terrible loss, it was easy for her to turn the tables. She had often felt badly for Miss Osborne. She was unmarried, and with her appearance, she might never be.

Miss Osborne's left cheek, her forehead and her neck were furrowed with pale scar tissue. Before Michelle was even born, the woman had been in some kind of car wreck—or so the school mythology claimed. Cosmetic surgery had only been able to accomplish so much, and apparently, the woman had refused out-and-out plastic surgery.

That was the story. Michelle didn't know what was true and what wasn't, except that Miss Osborne looked pretty grotesque, and she sure as hell wasn't going to ask the woman how it happened. She felt horrible for the seriously overweight spinster.

But Michelle had her own problems.

"Listen, Michelle. I think you're doing all right, but I do have one other concern," Miss Osborne said. She lifted her Disney World coffee mug and took a sip.

"Yes?" Michelle urged.

She wanted to get back to class. To not think about Jesse and Elaine, or anything else for that matter. She wanted to drop out of the pageant, too, but her mother had been Beach Queen her own senior year. She had always talked about Michelle following in her footsteps. Though she had not wanted to participate to begin with, now that she was in it, if Michelle quit, she knew she would regret it. She would feel as if, somehow, she had failed the memory of her mother.

"Have you and Sabrina and Carole discussed these murders together, talked about what you're all feeling?" Miss Osborne asked.

"Not really," Michelle admitted.

"I thought not," Miss Osborne said. "I'm concerned that your discovery on Sunday might have affected the friendship you girls have. It's not uncommon when one person in a group dies for the group to dissolve."

"I don't want that to happen," Michelle said anxiously.

"Well, let's see what we can do about it," Miss Osborne said, smiling warmly. "Why don't you three girls meet me here at school about, say, three thirty tomorrow afternoon? We'll take an hour and see what we can do."

Michelle agreed instantly. She'd already lost so much. She couldn't even think about losing Sabrina and Carole, too.

Michelle arrived a few minutes late for her meeting with Miss Osborne. As she walked down the worn cement steps, she couldn't help but remember how anxious Elaine had always become in the high school basement.

Elaine had always been a little nervous and insecure, despite her looks. When they had first met, she had been so much prettier than Michelle, but barely even aware of it. In those days, Michelle had loved to hear Elaine joke about her fears, to see a crack in that cool and beautiful demeanor.

Now she was dead.

Michelle adjusted the strap of her backpack, and followed the hallway around a tight corner. She wiped a moist tear from her cheek. Thinking about her ex-best friend filled her with grief, anger and regret.

Elaine had betrayed her by being with Jesse, there was no question about that. And yet, Michelle could not help but wonder if she hadn't been, herself, somewhat at fault. Michelle knew she hadn't been the best friend in the world. She'd become so absorbed in Jesse. Which really rankled, because, now that Elaine and Jesse were gone, she didn't miss her boyfriend as much as she missed her pal. Not by a long shot.

And then there was that stupid pageant. In a matter of days, it had turned from amusement into a vicious contest, and she hadn't even realized it. She would have to do better with Sabrina and Carole. She owed that much to Lainey.

The basement was deserted. On Fridays, everyone rushed out to the beach within minutes of the three o'clock bell. Even teachers carried bathing suits in their attaches. Michelle stopped in front of Miss Osborne's door, knocked quickly, then glanced at her watch. Three-thirty-four. Her two friends should have been here already.

Standing alone in the hall, with the recent murders so fresh in her memory, Michelle grew anxious. She felt a cold pinprick of fear begin to grow in her chest. Despite the fluorescent lights sputtering overhead, the basement seemed dark and dingy. Shadows pooled about her like...

Michelle shook her head, dropping her backpack on the linoleum. The murders were playing tricks with her mind. She knew Carole and Sabrina would arrive any minute. Hell, the two of them were always late.

"Miss O?" she called, knocking again on the wood-paneled door. "It's Michelle. Michelle Landry?"

No response. Weird.

Carole and Sabrina could be late, sure, with all that had happened in the last two days it was understandable. But Miss Osborne? She'd lay on the classic guilt trip if you came five minutes late to an appointment. Michelle had already been prepared with an excuse.

So where was she?

Michelle
turn it, she heard
behind her, the
click-clack of
heeled steps.
Then there
was a terrible
scream, which
echoed and rang
on the linoleum
Oh, Jesus.

trying to help her, and I pulled out the knife, and then there was...God, so much blood, and..."

"Back off, Carole!" Michelle cried. She was horrified, but at once she felt a fury deep inside her, like a pool of molten rock, burning. "Keep away from me, you crazy bitch!"

"Please!" Carole said. She glanced at the knife in her fist, then at Michelle. Her eyes were crazed and streaked with pain. "I didn't mean to, you have to believe me!"

Michelle backed away, putting her hand against the plaster for support.

"You killed Sabrina!" she shrieked, and the words sounded unbelievable to her ears, and yet simple and obvious. After all, hadn't it been Carole who pointed out that Sarah Shipman's death meant less competition?

"You killed Jesse, too, and Sarah!" Michelle yelled, verging on hysteria herself.

"No!" Carole cried desperately. She reached out with her empty and bloodied hand.

"And Elaine, oh, my God!" Michelle muttered, out of breath. "You killed my best friend...."

She looked past Carole, at Sabrina's bloody corpse crumpled by the stairs. With a start, she realized that, by backing up, she had cut herself off from the only escape route. For the first time, Michelle was truly afraid for her life.

"I didn't mean to," Carole said sadly, ambling closer and closer, until it seemed that she could have lunged forward and stabbed her with the gory blade.

Too close.

Michelle spun and burst down the hallway. In her mind, she saw the crabs crawling over Jesse and Elaine. Saw her mother crushed in the wreck of the family's Honda Civic. What was it like, she wondered? What was it like to die? Suddenly, another image entered her head. A vision of herself lying on the cold linoleum, a curved knife protruding from her tanned neck.

No! She wasn't going to die at the hands of some blonde beach bunny, not for a stupid pageant. Miss Osborne's office was maybe a dozen feet away. She prayed that the counselor's little speech at the beginning of the semester about her open-door policy was true. Please, God, let it be unlocked.

She leaped and grabbed onto the greasy handle. To her relief, she felt the latch click, and she shoved open the door and slipped inside.

"Please," Carole begged, as Michelle slammed the door and struggled to lock herself inside. "I didn't mean to..."

"Stay away!" Michelle roared.

She smacked the light switch with her palm. A moment later, Carole's fists began to pound on the door. Despite her slim body, Carole was a strong girl, and her blows rattled the flimsy frame.

Michelle shuffled back and hurriedly surveyed her "hideout." There was the desk behind her, and a couple of folding chairs propped against the filing cabinet, and the bookcase filled with framed pictures and awards to her left.

A barricade. She had to make a barricade.

"Please, Michelle," Carole whispered, "you have to listen to me. Open up, will you?"

In response, Michelle grasped the bookcase and, with much difficulty, slid it in front of the doorway. As she jerked it into place, the bookcase rocked slightly, and a picture tumbled off the top shelf. She paid no attention, even as the glass shattered at her feet. She turned swiftly and reached across the desk for the phone.

It was dead. She struck the cradle once, twice, but still there was no dial tone. She pulled on the cord, and instantly the cable came loose and snaked onto the desktop.

Not loose. Ripped out of the wall.

What the hell was going on?

"Michelle?" Carole pleaded from the hallway. "Please, please, please, open the door. I swear to you, I didn't kill Sabrina. It wasn't me, you have to believe me!"

Michelle paced in the narrow office, trying to figure out how she could get past Carole. Something crunched beneath her shoe. It was the picture on she had knocked from the bookcase. She looked more closely and was stunned to recognize it.

It was a photograph she had seen a million times—her mother used to keep a copy in their family album.

But why would Miss Osborne have it in her office?

Michelle knelt down and picked up the broken frame. There, in the faded color print, she saw the Beach Queen contestants of 1971, grinning widely, their arms linked together in a forced gesture of friendship.

Michelle's mother was fourth from the left. She looked great in her old-fashioned striped bikini. The way she stood, with her shoulders squared and her head thrown back a little, you would think she had won the crown already.

But it was the girl standing next to her that caught Michelle's attention. She was gorgeous, with a perfect hour-glass figure and hippie-style straight blond hair that curled at her waist. She had never noticed the girl in the photo before -she had always been looking at her mother—but Michelle thought she looked strangely familiar.

"Open up, please," Carole pleaded. Her voice was growing hoarser, more desperate.

On impulse, Michelle flipped the picture over, and a piece of paper slid out and landed on her skirt. She picked it up with the tips of her fingers. A newspaper clipping. Packed to a neat rectangle.

"Oh, my God, Michelle! Open the door!" Carole screamed.

"Yeah, right," Michelle said with fake bravado. Carefully she unfolded the clipping.

The article mentioned her mother and a car accident, so at first Michelle mistook it for a recent news item detailing the circumstances of her mother's

death. But then she saw the headline and realized that it was much older – dating back, in fact, to the 1972 Beach Queen pageant.

"Please," Carole sobbed outside the door, but without any real enthusiasm. She sounded as though she were falling asleep out there.

Michelle took a deep breath and read on.

The accident happened the day before the pageant. Three girls in a brand-new Chevy Nova. Michelle's mom driving under the influence. No wonder she'd never heard about it!

"Let me in, please..."

Her mother missed a turn. The car struck a Volkswagen van full of Vietnam protesters head-on. Michelle's mom was tossed clear of the wreckage, unharmed. One girl was killed instantly. The third critically injured. The third girl.

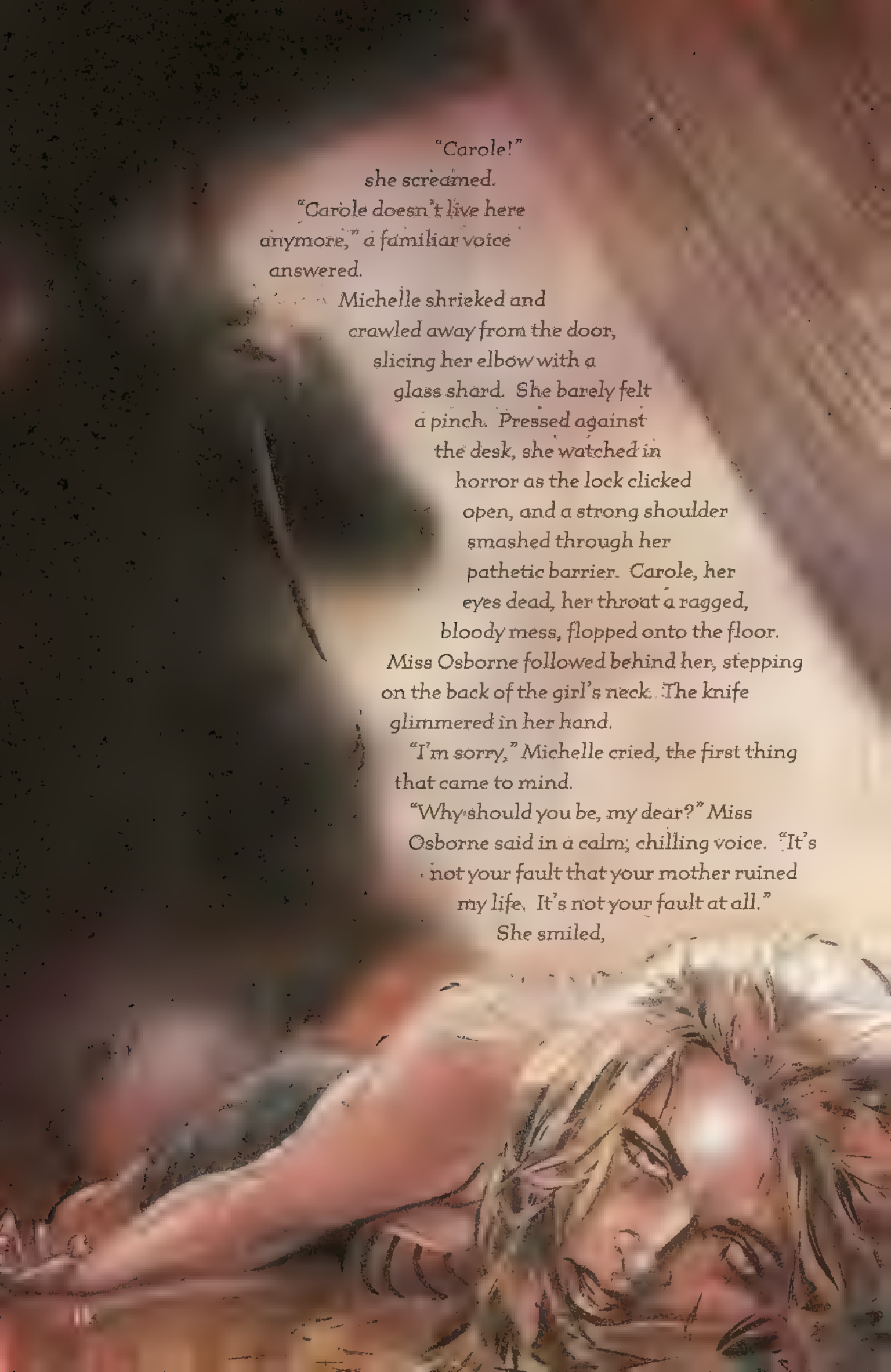
Miss Osborne!

"Oh, God..." Michelle whispered.

She turned over the frame and looked at the picture again. There she was—Miss Osborne the way she looked before shattering windshield shards shredded her face, before the gas tank exploded. She had been beautiful.

It was then that Michelle noticed the quiet. "Carole?" she whispered. "Are you there?"

Something thumped loudly on the wood. Michelle tried to shift forward on her hands and knees, but her palm slipped in a small, sticky puddle on the floor. She tumbled and smacked her chin against the linoleum. Startled, she stroked her face, then glanced at her fingers. Blood. Not her own. Seeping under the barricade.



"Carole!" she screamed.

"Carole doesn't live here anymore," a familiar voice answered.

Michelle shrieked and crawled away from the door, slicing her elbow with a glass shard. She barely felt a pinch. Pressed against the desk, she watched in horror as the lock clicked open, and a strong shoulder smashed through her pathetic barrier. Carole, her eyes dead, her throat a ragged, bloody mess, flopped onto the floor. Miss Osborne followed behind her, stepping on the back of the girl's neck. The knife glimmered in her hand.

"I'm sorry," Michelle cried, the first thing that came to mind.

"Why should you be, my dear?" Miss Osborne said in a calm, chilling voice. "It's not your fault that your mother ruined my life. It's not your fault at all."

She smiled,

and her face curled into a brutal mask, and suddenly the extent of her anger, of her insanity stood revealed.

Michelle scrambled to her feet. She glanced around her for a weapon—a lamp, a letter opener, anything.

"Please, Miss O," she pleaded, "please don't hurt me."

"Hurt you?" Miss Osborne said, grasping her blouse in mock surprise. Her hand left a crimson stain on the collar. "But I've been helping you, my dear. I've eliminated your competition, just like your mother did twenty five years ago."

"No," Michelle muttered, "no, please. Mom didn't mean to, she was so young and..."

"Don't worry about mommy," Miss Osborne said, "I already took care of that slut."

Michelle froze, her mouth open in silent horror.

The accident that killed her mother had never been explained.

Michelle felt a flush in her cheeks, and tears stung her eyes—hot, prickly tears that washed down her face and pooled quickly at her throat.

Damn you, she thought.

"Why are you crying, my dear?" the counselor cooed. "I've seen what's left of the girls, and believe me, you're a shoe-in. There's no question that you'll be the Beach Queen this year...."

"In fact," she continued, her eyes beaming, her voice rising like a swell, "I think we can skip the pageant, and jump right...to...the... coronation!"

She sprang forward and cocked her knife arm. Michelle whipped her hands up and grabbed hold of Miss Osborne's right wrist, preventing the knife from descending. With her left hand, Miss Osborne clutched Michelle's throat and lifted her off the ground by several inches.

Michelle couldn't breathe! Miss Osborne was so strong, stronger than she ever would have imagined. The woman was smiling so gleefully wide, and a bit of drool had begun to slide from the side of her mouth.

Dark spots filled Michelle's vision, and she thought she might be blacking out. She wanted to let go, to claw at Miss Osborne's choking left hand.

God, she needed to breathe!

But the knife was there, so close. And, as Michelle weakened, it got closer. The blade dipped toward Michelle's throat, and she could see her own, panicked, bulging eyes reflected in it.

Closer.

Her grip began to loosen.

Closer.

The point of the knife touched her throat. Punctured her. Drew blood, but Michelle was so numb she barely felt it.

"Poor girl," Miss Osborne cooed. "Now you've gone and lost the crown."

In the haze brought on by the lack of oxygen, Michelle almost surrendered. But that taunting voice brought her back. She narrowed her eyes, glaring at Miss Osborne with defiance. Another second and the knife would slide through flesh and arteries in her neck, and her lifeblood would spray across the room. She could see it happen if she closed her eyes. But Michelle wouldn't close her eyes! She wouldn't surrender! This woman had murdered her mother, and she had to be stopped.

Michelle mustered the last ounce of energy she had within her. She braced her feet against the wall behind her, and slammed her head forward as hard as she could. Her skull bounced off Miss Osborne's with a thundering crack, and the woman staggered back, dropping Michelle in a heap on the floor.

Throat ragged and throbbing with pain, Michelle sucked in glorious gulps of air. Miss Osborne shook her head, disoriented, then came for her again. She didn't seem as confident, now that she had been hurt. But she was just as savage, just as insane.

Michelle lurched to her feet. The knife swept down toward her breast, but she stood firm. Miss Osborne had to pay for what she had done to her mom. Michelle picked up the dead telephone from her counselor's desk. She sidestepped the woman's attack and swung the phone with all of her fury and might. The phone slammed against Miss Osborne's skull with a sickening thud and a chilling, tiny ring.

Miss Osborne stumbled and crashed into the desk. She screamed then, and Michelle saw with horror that the woman had impaled herself on her own knife. She had hit the desk so hard, and with such weight, that the blade's point protruded from Miss Osborne's back, blood dripping from it to the ground.

The woman grunted, then slid quietly to the floor. She flopped on her back, a surprised expression on her face. The knife's handle jutted from Miss Osborne's chest, and blood soaked her dress.

"You learn fast, girl," the scarred madwoman croaked. "Anything for the crown."

Miss Osborne closed her eyes, and wheezed a long, last breath.

Already, Michelle could hear a siren in the distance.

It was over. All of it, over and done with.

Except for the pageant, of course.

CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN

Christopher Golden is the author of ten novels including the vampire epics *Of Saints and Shadows*™ and *Angel Souls & Devil Hearts*™, and the best-selling trilogy, *X-Men*™: *Mutant Empire*. His young adult books include the thriller *Beach Blanket Psycho*™ and *Star Wars*™: *Shadows of the Empire*. Golden has worked on such comic book titles as *Wolverine*™, *Vampirella*™, *Waterworld*™, *Daredevil/Shi*™ and *The Crow*™: *Waking Nightmares*, as well as his creator-owned series, *Thundergod*™.

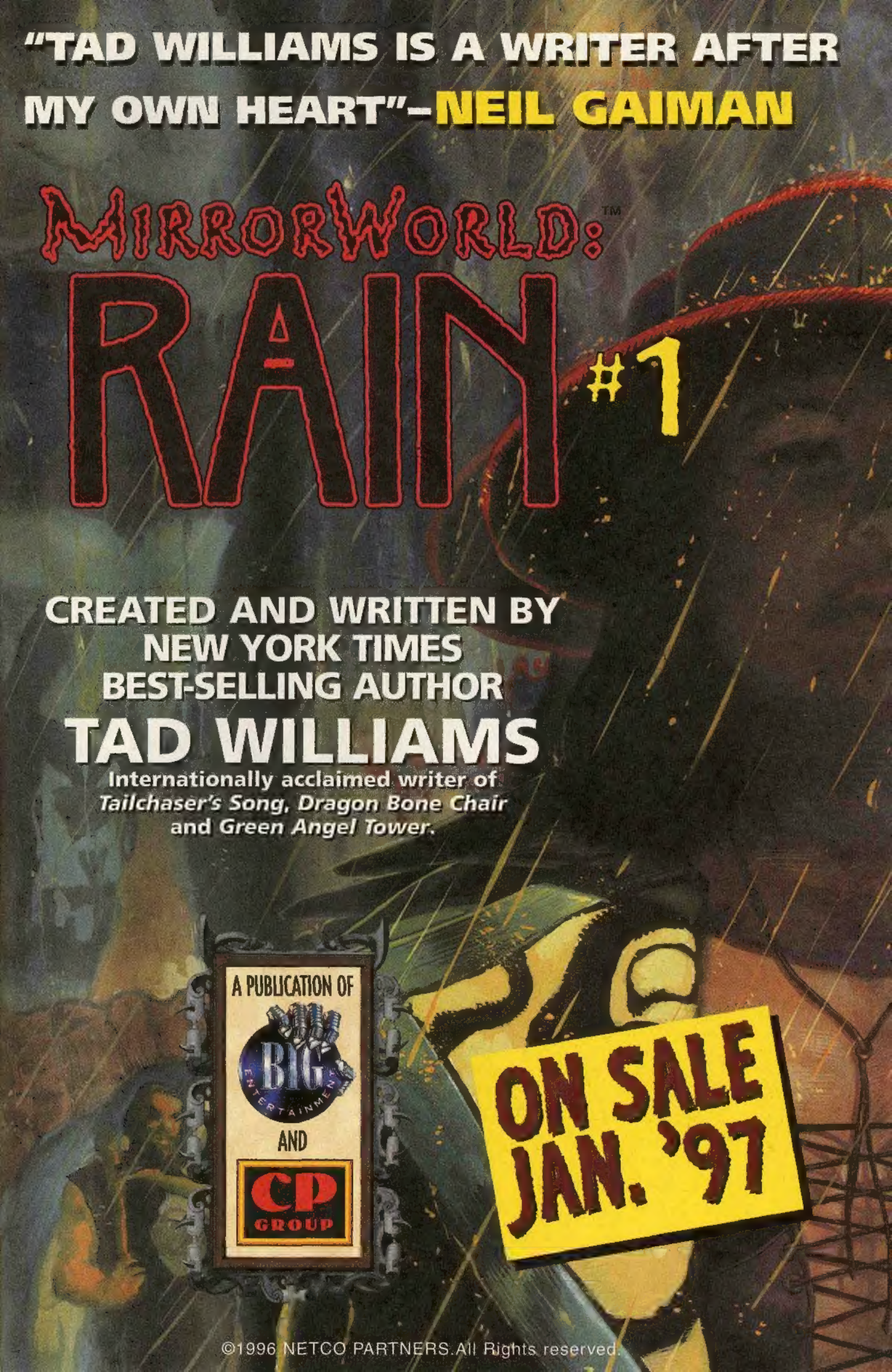
Before becoming a full-time writer, he was Licensing Manager for *Billboard* magazine in New York, where he worked on Fox Television's Billboard Music Awards and American Top 40 radio, among many other projects. He is currently at work on the hardcover novel *Wolverine: Espionage*, as well as a *Battlestar Galactica*™ novel to be co-authored with actor Richard Hatch.

C. BRADFORD GORBY

Artist C. Bradford Gorby recalls his youth as a time when he could channel the spirit of Godzilla™ to do battle with plastic army men in his backyard, be seduced by lurid and provocative ads for "adult" movies which tantalized him from the entertainment section of his daily newspaper and spend Saturday nights in the company of Vincent Price, Boris Karloff and Flash Gordon. Citing creative influences ranging from Michelangelo to Norman Rockwell, John William Waterhouse to Tex Avery, it is no wonder that his art embodies both the sublime and the ridiculous. He wouldn't have it any other way. Like himself, his work remains uncluttered by pretense or higher aspirations; it serves only one purpose: to entertain. A simple ambition, clarified by a three-year stint in the corporate advertising field.

Currently, Gorby is working as a penciler on *Mickey Spillane's Mike Danger*™ from BIG Entertainment as well as continuing his career as the regular penciler on *Femforce*™ for AC Comics. He has all but forsaken his primary trades of sculptor and animator. He has worked for DC, Eclipse, TSR, Knight Press, Caliber, Todd McFarlane Prod. and SONY, among others, during a career spanning fifteen years.

Gorby resides in Orlando, Florida with his cat Tippi Toe, and he admits that *Melrose Place* is his only contact with reality.



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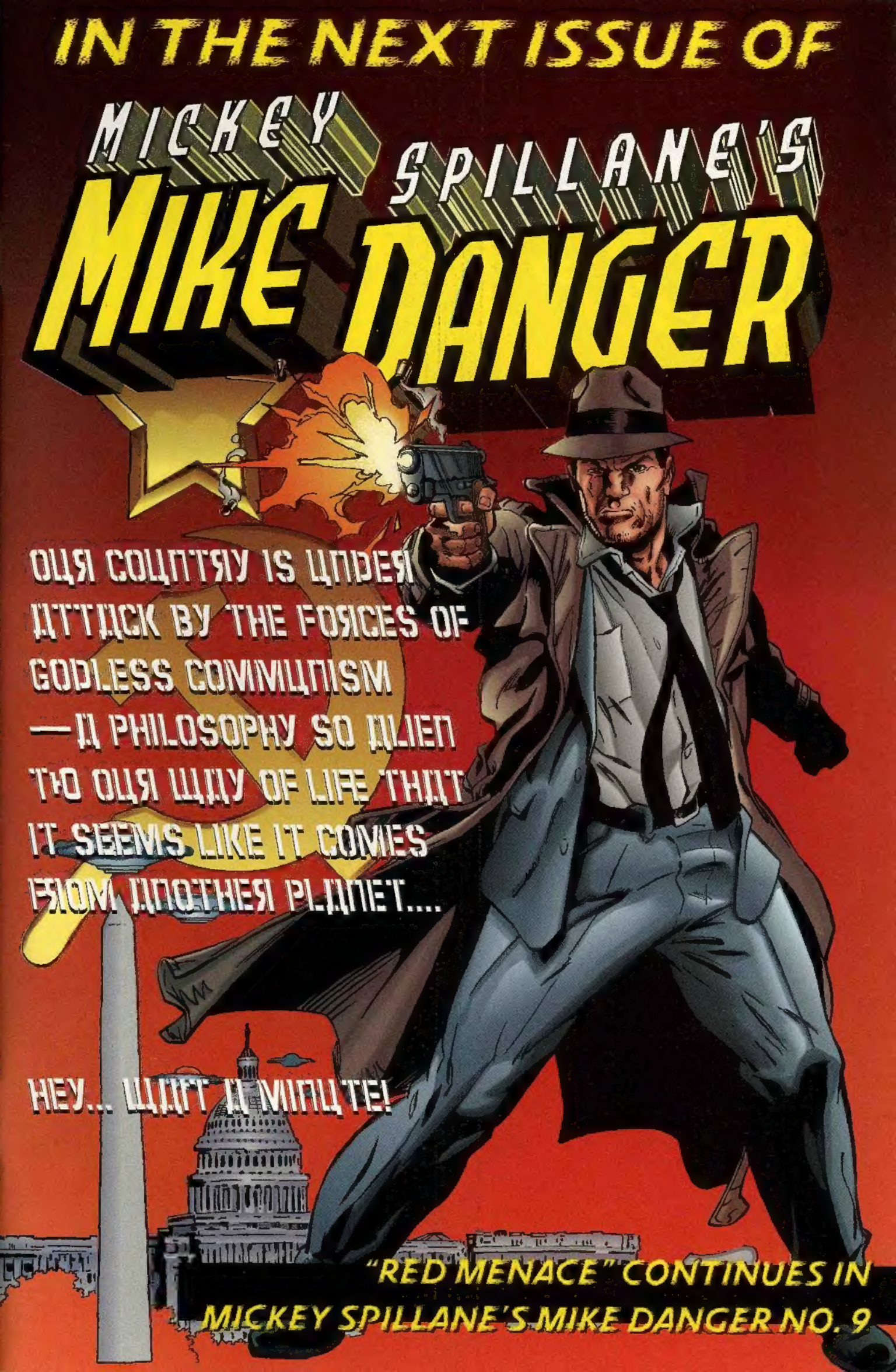

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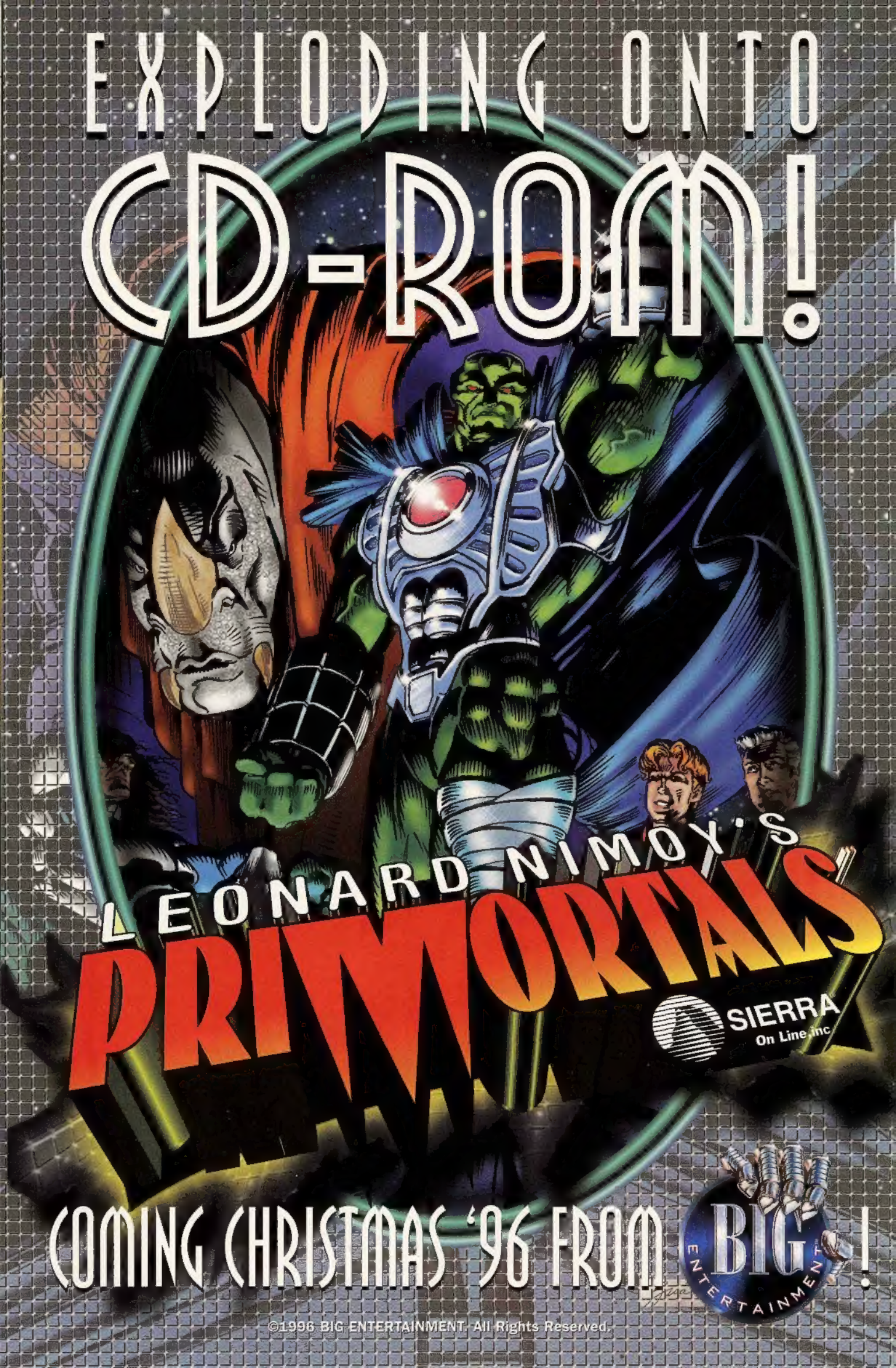
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